

# ***Public Assistance Service Centers:*** **A Case Study of Sonoma County's** **Economic Assistance Service Center**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Alameda County Social Services Agency's Economic Benefits Department (EBD) is exploring ways to use its current technology, finances, and human resources to improve its caseload management and work efficiency. As a result of caseload increases and a limited availability of staff, EBD is experiencing difficulty with caseload management. This case study aims to explore if Sonoma County's Economic Assistance Service Center (EASC) could be a viable model for Alameda County's EBD.

Sonoma County's EASC uses a telephone center and task-based case management. Through observation and dialogues with both managers and staff at the EASC, it is clear that the service center model is

a better process than the individual caseload assignment model. The service center concept has more flexibility and produces greater efficiency in the prioritization, assignment, and completion of tasks. Customer calls are answered more expediently, and tasks generated by those calls are completed in a timely manner.

It is recommended that Alameda County's EBD establish banked caseloads for its on-going cases and implement a task-based case management process. It is also recommended that Alameda County's Call Center add eligibility functions to its current services.

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## **Introduction**

As is the case with many other California counties, Alameda County's Economic Benefits Department (EBD) is currently faced with many issues related to its eligibility caseload management. The main contributing factors hindering effectiveness and efficiency in caseload management are caseload increases and limited resources. Alameda County's EBD currently has 168 Eligibility Technicians (ET) who are each assigned to approximately 600 all-aids/programs cases. There are approximately 20,800 active CalWORKs cases, 9,600 active General Assistance cases, 9,600 active Non-Assistance Food Stamp cases, and 59,000 active Medi-Cal cases. Between all of the programs, there are a total of approximately 99,000 active cases.

The problems being experienced by Alameda County's EBD are not unique; however, the current high caseload volume is exacerbating and magnifying the situation. The most significant complaints customers have had regarding EBD are that telephone calls are not returned in a timely manner or returned at all, and that requested case updates are not completed efficiently. At the same time, eligibility technicians complain that they do not have enough time to return customer calls or to effectively manage the tasks required for their caseloads.

Sonoma County's EASC was selected for this case study to discover if components of the service center model could provide viable and feasible solutions for Alameda County's EBD.

## **EASC Background**

Sonoma County implemented EASC in April 2007 as a solution to its caseload management problems.

EASC is responsible for managing and maintaining ongoing Medi-Cal, CMSP (County Medical Services Program—Medically Indigent Adults), and Non-Assistance Food Stamp caseloads. EASC's two main components are a *telephone call center* and *task-based case management*.

EASC uses several telephone technologies and task management software programs to manage its call center and task assignments. To operate the phone center, the EASC uses Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) and Global Navigation System (GNAV) to manage and track the flow and assignment of customer calls. EASC uses multiple programs to facilitate its case management model: CalWIN (CalWORKs Information Network) to manage eligibility and benefit determination and to generate task lists; Medi-Cal Eligibility Data System (MEDS) for verifications and case/client clearance; OnBase (document imaging) to manage documents and support case management; and Task Management Tracker (TMT) to assign and track tasks.

Table 1 was created based on the EASC's 2009 annual summary.

## **The Phone Center**

EASC assigned thirteen phone eligibility workers (PEWs) and two PEW supervisors to the phone center. The EASC's phone center is expected to receive and answer calls from customers whose Medi-Cal, CMSP, or Food Stamp cases are assigned to the banked caseloads at the service center. The Automatic Call Distribution system routes the incoming calls based on options that the callers select from the call menu. For example, a call from a Spanish-speaking customer re-

TABLE 1

<b>Calls Received</b>	75, 858 calls received. Average of 6,322 calls monthly
<b>Calls Answered</b>	62,998 calls answered. Average of 5,250 calls monthly
<b>Total Tasks Generated</b>	84,888 individual tasks assigned. Average of 7,074 per month
<b>Case Counts</b>	36,761 combined for Medi-Cal, CMSP and Food Stamp
<b>Case-to-Worker Ratio</b>	$36,761/48 = 766$ cases per worker (counting eligibility workers only)
<b>Staffing</b>	6 Eligibility Supervisors, 48 Eligibility Workers (I/II and III designation), 13 various assignment clerical persons.

garding Medi-Cal is routed to an available PEW with Spanish language designation.

For call management and tracking, the EASC uses the Global Navigation System program (GNAV). GNAV provides managers or supervisors with the capability to instantly track and monitor call statuses. The PEW Supervisors are responsible for creating PEWs' availability schedule and for addressing issues such as work overflow and calls that do not get resolved in a reasonable timeframe. Overflow customer calls can be assigned to Case Maintenance Eligibility Workers (CMEW) for backup support.

### Task-Based Process

The EASC employed seven office assistants, five human services aides, one telephone operator, and one clerical supervisor to perform clerical tasks and support the PEWs and CMEWs. There are about thirty-five CMEWs and four CMEW supervisors who are responsible for managing and performing the tasks generated by the EASC's banked cases.

Task lists are generated using CalWIN reports, various state reports, customer drop-in needs, and other tasks identified by the department. CMEW

supervisors and a section manager are responsible for identifying tasks and ensuring that tasks are completed. The clerical staff and supervisor manage TMT to assign and track tasks. CMEWs are responsible for completing their assigned tasks.

EASC's workers and managers meet regularly to review and analyze CalWIN and TMT reports. The team looks at current trends and the task statuses. If any particular task is identified as having a potential backlog, the team re-prioritizes and directs its focus onto that particular task until it becomes manageable again.

The ability to quickly analyze, strategize and re-prioritize tasks demonstrates the great flexibility of the EASC's task-based process. The chances of tasks not getting completed or of workers becoming overwhelmed by task requirements are significantly minimized in this model. Some of the workers interviewed confirmed that they have experienced improvements in both their job satisfaction and work efficiency. For CMEWs, they are now able to work on tasks without interruptions from customer calls. The PEWs, on the other hand, do not have to put further work into cases beyond receiving the telephone calls. Routine and recurring tasks such as processing Quarterly Reports (QR 7) and annual renewals/re-determinations are not a regular part of the PEWs' phone center duties; QR 7s are only assigned to PEWs if there is a backlog in the CMEW units.

### Implications, Costs, and Benefits

During its planning and development stages, as well as in its post-implementation stage, Sonoma County Human Services Department has been examining the many costs and benefits of changing its service model. The non-financial implications of developing a service center included:

- Staff concerns and resistance
- New training needs
- Determining how to have equitable task assignments
- Ensuring adequate language availability
- Noises from the phone center
- Labor union concerns

The financial costs of adopting a service center included:

- Consulting services, valued at approximately \$630,000
- Initial telephone equipment and licenses for 50 GNAV users, costing an estimated \$65,000
- The cost of hiring up to eight additional eligibility workers (exact cost unknown)

At the same time, the benefits of having a service center have included:

- Improved customer services
- An increase in staff job satisfaction and an improved sense of control over their assignments
- A significant reduction in customer complaints
- A more flexible case management process

## Conclusion

As caseloads across California counties remain at high volume, and as fiscal constraints continue to limit the ability to hire additional staff, many counties are moving toward (or have already moved toward) using service centers to better manage their caseloads. Some counties that have implemented service centers have reported that having a call center and task-based case management has contributed to the improvement of both their customer service and their staff job satisfaction.

Sonoma County has clearly benefited from the implementation of its service center: customers are able to speak directly to phone center staff and have their inquiries addressed during their first contact, and case management workers are able to perform tasks without the interruption of multiple telephone calls, messages, and complaints.

## Recommendations

Alameda County's EBD has experience creating and managing a "Benefit Center" where cases were banked; therefore, the following recommendations will not be completely a new concept to many of the staff and managers in the county. At the time of this case study, there is already a task-based process pilot proposed to begin within the next couple of months.

It is recommended that EBD should create banked caseloads for Medi-Cal and Non-Assistance Food Stamp cases and implement a task-based case management model. This should be completed before the end of 2010, after the proposed task-based pilot has been evaluated. EBD should re-assign up to one-hundred of its current Eligibility Technician IIS from caseload assignment to task-based process. This reassignment number is proportional to the number of workers at Sonoma County's EASC (48 eligibility workers). Since Alameda County has about double the amount of combined Medi-Cal and Non-Assistance Food Stamp cases as Sonoma County, it is estimated that twice as many workers will be needed.

Alameda County has been playing a leading role in using available technologies to create and update processes that can improve business operations. Two such processes that have been implemented are a central call center and an automated Voice Response Unit (VRU). The Call Center handles all calls made by customers whose cases are assigned to individual district (on-going caseload) eligibility technicians. Numerous tasks that do not require complex eligibility determination and benefit calculation are completed by eligibility support clerks (ESCs) assigned to the Call Center.

The VRU also contributes to the handling of customers' inquiries. By navigating through a scripted menu of options, customers can obtain case information; additionally, they can choose to have the system forward e-mails to the caseworkers to alert them of their call. As a result, many of the calls that come through VRU do not need to be answered by a caseworker.

While the Call Center's clerical staff and VRU are able to provide significant relief to workers' workloads, many complex eligibility tasks require further program knowledge, eligibility determination, and actions before the inquiry can be resolved and completed. It is recommended that Alameda County Social Services Agency's Call Center hire up to five Eligibility Technician IIS to work along side the ESCs before the end of 2010. This will ensure that tasks generated by customer calls are completed at the

Call Center; as a consequence, this should allow the task-based case maintenance eligibility technicians to work on their assigned tasks without telephone call interruptions.

The above recommendations require buy-in from labor unions and staff. EBD will be faced with the challenge of clearly communicating to labor unions and staff the benefits of implementing a service center, as well as explaining the planning process and how the recommended changes will be executed. There should be very minimal financial costs associated with the transfer and training of five eligibility technicians into the Call Center and the reassignment of up to one-hundred eligibility technicians to task-based case management.

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